

# Check sparks Chieftains' winning shot

## Senior Taormina scores two goals to lead Utica

By **Chuck Klonke**

Special to The Macomb Daily

"Takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'"

That's the theme of an old watch commercial. It also describes Utica's Jonathan Taormina.

The Chieftains' senior co-captain scored two goals to lead Utica to a 5-1 victory against Stevenson Friday in

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### High School Boys Hockey

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a Macomb Area Conference Red Division hockey game at Suburban Ice Macomb.

Taormina's second goal, a shorthanded tally at 11:53 of the second period, gave the Chieftains a 3-1 lead and came shortly after he absorbed a hard check in front of the Utica bench.

"After that hit I was mad," Taormina said. "When I was on the bench I was thinking, 'I've got to come out and make up for that hit.' When I

got back on the ice, I was still pretty upset. I had to release some anger."

He did it in the best way possible. Taormina picked up a loose puck, skated in alone on goalie Andrew Kallo, deked him, then flipped a backhand over his prone body.

Taormina opened the scoring at 7:04 of the first period, assisted by Jacob Doran and Brandon Cotsonika.

"I just kind of walked

around (the net) and fired a backhand through the five-hole," Taormina said. "I just wanted to put it on net and hoped I'd get lucky."

It had been a rough week for the Chieftains until Friday. They were outscored 17-1 in losses to MAC Red rivals St. Clair Shores and Dakota.

"We were upset after those two games," Taormina said. "We came out with the mentality that we can't go 0-3 for the week. We have to pick ourselves up and come out

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firing -- and we did that. Everyone raised up their level of play."

Taormina is one of only a handful of seniors on the Utica team and one of his jobs as captain is to keep the younger players from getting discouraged.

"It's hard," he said. "Everyone gets down too quickly and they think we're a bad team. We're just young. You have to come out and say, 'we're gonna win the next game.' You have to come out flying, come out firing, give everything you've got and sometimes you'll play like we did tonight and get the win. We just want to keep getting better as the season goes on."

Utica coach George Dritsas wasn't surprised that his team bounced back from its two rough outings this week.

"They're gritty," he said. "We're not the most talented team, but we won't quit. They don't give up on themselves. We put a couple of tough games behind us. We've got St. Clair Shores and Dakota again when we come back from the break, so I guess we had to take care of

business when we could."

Stevenson coach Jon Strong was disappointed with the way his team played.

"It was rough to watch behind the bench," he said. "We lost our composure and took a lot of bad penalties. I keep preaching, 'let it go. Be positive. Nothing after the whistle.' Sometimes they listen, sometimes they don't."

"We have a practice next Wednesday and we'll address a lot of mistakes that happened tonight. Composure is something we have to learn. You can practice all you want on plays, but composure is something that comes from within. Once we got on our heels, the guys didn't respond like I wanted them to."

Utica's Kurtis VanDrunen, who had missed two months with a knee injury, made it 2-0 with an unassisted goal at 12:01 of the first period. A little over a minute later, the Titans cut the lead in half when Jake Hess took a pass from Kenny Wurth on a 3-on-2 break and beat goalie Ethan Smith.

Taormina's shorthanded goal gave Utica a two-goal

cushion. Tyler Benoot and Alec George scored third-period goals for the Chieftains. Benoot's, which was assisted by Harrison Flores, came on a power play.

Smith had another strong game in goal for Utica.

"He's the reason we've won our games," Taormina said. "He keeps us in every game. He gets a lot of shots, but he always has our backs. We can always count on him. He has to be one of the best goalies around."

Strong said that Stevenson is going through some growing pains this season.

"It's a work in progress," he said. "We have a lot of young kids and some seniors that come from other hockey organizations. We're trying to marry all these different talent levels and attitudes into a cohesive hockey team."

"I want to bring back the honor and respect for kids playing for their high school hockey teams and the feeder schools in our system and get a real strong hockey program for Stevenson."

Utica is 1-3-0 in the MAC Red and 3-7-0 overall. Stevenson slipped to 0-3-0 in the division and 4-6-0 overall.